The Action Plan for Australian Birds 2010

The 2010 Action Plan lists 19% of taxa as threatened. The number is similar to the 2000 Action Plan (Garnett and Crowley 2000), with 61 taxa listed as less threatened and 26 listed at a higher level of threat. Better information, changes in taxonomy, and changes in the Red List’s criteria are reasons given for most changes in status. However, a few species have increased in abundance and have been demoted, while others have decreased and their threatened status increased.

In Recher (1999), I expressed reservations about the way the status of Australia’s birds was assessed. I argued the criteria of the Red List were too restrictive and their interpretation too political. Despite not caring, politicians and senior public servants do not like reading about species becoming extinct; it is bad publicity. There is no scope in the Red List criteria to project trends into the future or to account for future threats (e.g., climate change, increased fire frequency, coastal development). In effect the assessment of status relies on past events, with conservation strategies inevitably trying to restore populations and species instead of preventing declines and losses. Garnett and I do not disagree about the future of Australia’s avifauna than I am (Garnett 1999). What I see is an avifauna in chronic decline, which as Garnett (1999) noted tends to be “increaser” taxa in the next decadal review, with conservation management aimed at arresting the decline of Australia’s birds bar a few high profile species, most of which are already dead men walking.

With 19% of avian taxa “officially” recognized as extinct or threatened, an alert and compassionate nation concerned about the welfare of its natural heritage should act to reverse the pattern of decline. Instead, conservation management is at a standstill and as much in chronic decline as Australia’s biota. Of equal concern, there is an aspect of change in the avifauna that receives no mention in the Action Plans and little attention in conservation management. Many taxa have benefited from agriculture, urban expansion, and related activities, and have increased in abundance. Taxa that increase are as much an indicator of changing and dysfunctional ecosystems as those that are in decline (Recher 1999). I hope that those who prepare the Action Plans for Australian Birds will accept that and include the “increaser” taxa in the next decadal review, with equally clear conservation objectives as are now given for threatened taxa.

Garnett and his colleagues have assembled a large amount of information on the status of Australia’s birds. It makes for sobering reading, but it is important that we have these periodic assessments. It is also important that there be a set of criteria, such as the Red List, that everyone can refer to. Despite the value of the Red List, I would like to see status assessed differently using wider criteria, with
The Atlas of Coasts & Oceans: Ecosystems, Threatened Resources, Marine Conservation


HARRY F. RECHER

OCEANS cover 70% of Earth, but the impact of humans on the world’s seas and oceans is boundless. Boundless in the sense that human impacts begin on the land at the headwaters of every creek, stream, and river flowing to the sea and extend without interruption along and across every coast and estuary to the most remote and deepest parts of the oceans. Human impacts are carried with waters flowing to the sea, in the air blowing across continents, and in every vessel, regardless of size or number of occupants, that ventures out from the land. No ocean escapes the impact of humanity and nowhere at sea is there any longer wilderness.

The Atlas of Coasts & Oceans is a summary of the impacts of people on the world’s oceans, their resources, and on other people using the oceans. The text is presented in six parts. The first, “People and coasts” describes the settlement of people along the coasts and their impact on shorelines. Half the world’s people live on or near the coast. “Major threats to ocean resources” summarizes the effects people have on marine ecosystems, including the open ocean, fisheries, seagrass, mangroves, and coral reefs. Only 20% of potentially exploitable fish stocks have the potential for greater production; 40% of global fisheries have “collapsed”, with trends showing 100% will have collapsed by 2050. There are now in excess of 400 “dead zones”, coastal areas that have become “eutrophic” as a result of excessive inputs of nutrients from agriculture, industry, and sewage (treated and untreated). Dead zones affect about 250,000 km² of coastal areas around the world, with the most extensive areas along the east and gulf coasts of the United States, northern Europe, Japan, and southeast Asia. “Trade, commerce, and tourism” discusses shipping, the extraction of energy from the sea (oil, gas, wind, tide, and waves), tourism, and mariculture. Ninety percent of the world’s commerce is shipped by sea and oil spills, dredging, and the translocation of exotic marine life have significant impacts on marine life. Between 70 and 80 percent of mangrove forests in Vietnam and the Philippines have been cleared to establish prawn (shrimp) farms. If you buy imported prawns in Australia, you are contributing to the destruction of the world’s most productive natural ecosystems along with the people who previously relied upon them for their livelihoods. “Climate change” presents the impacts of human-induced global warming on the world’s oceans. Among the impacts are more extreme weather events, loss of polar ice, and rising sea levels. Although the conventional forecast is for a sea level rise of 20–90 cms by 2100, studies at Princeton and Harvard universities have found that the polar ice sheets are more vulnerable than thought and a sea level rise of six to nine meters is possible with a 2°C